

# THE LIBERTY BELL

THE Liberty Bell is one of our nation's most treasured relics. Every year millions of visitors to the Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia file past the big, familiar bell. Rung on July 8, 1776, to celebrate the Declaration of Independence, the bell is a fitting symbol of freedom in our land.

In 1732 the Province of Pennsylvania began the construction of a State House, now Independence Hall, to house the meetings of the General Assembly. In the 1740's the brick tower and the main staircase were added to the building, and in 1750 a wooden steeple. In 1751 Isaac Norris, the Speaker of the Assembly and a superintendent of the State House, proposed that a bell be installed, and with the two other superintendents requested the agent of Pennsylvania in London to order it. Norris was a wealthy and scholarly Quaker who knew the Bible. In the letter, Norris and his colleagues asked that the bell be cast with the words, "Proclaim Liberty thro' all the Land to all the Inhabitants thereof," from the tenth verse, twenty-fifth chapter of the book of Leviticus. A greater part of the verse reads, in the words of the King James version, "And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubile unto you ...." This ancient proclamation of amnesty was chosen to honor the fiftieth anniversary of the Charter of Privileges, granted to the people of Pennsylvania and Delaware by William Penn, their Proprietor. This charter conceded to the Pennsylvania Assembly the fuller legislative powers it had demanded, and had in fact exercised, for several years. Thus, the bell was intended as a commemoration of liberties which were insured fifty years before, not as a prophecy of liberty to be gained twenty-five years later.

In 1752 the bell arrived from the Whitechapel

Foundry of London, where it was designed and cast by master founder Thomas Lester. On the first stroke of the clapper in the New World, a crack appeared in the brim, ruining the sound! The bell was recast by two Philadelphia foundrymen, John Stow and John Pass, who substituted the year 1753 for 1752 and their own names for those of the original founders. The bell was hung and a great feast was given: the founders, however, had added too much copper and the bell's tone was poor. Stow and Pass were criticized so much for this that they asked permission to recast it once more. This time tin was added and in June, 1753, the bell was again mounted in the steeple. The full inscription reads:

PROCLAIM LIBERTY THROUGHOUT ALL THE  
LAND UNTO ALL THE INHABITANTS THEREOF LEV.  
XXV/X

BY ORDER OF THE ASSEMBLY OF THE PROVINCE  
OF PENNSYLVANIA FOR THE STATE HOUSE IN  
PHILADA

PASS AND STOW  
PHILADA  
MDCCLIII

As the official town bell, its main purpose was to call the Assembly to its meetings. Members who were late or absent were fined and the money was given to the Pennsylvania Hospital. The bell also called town meetings, served as a fire alarm, celebrated the conclusion of wars, and tolled the deaths of great men.

Not all of Philadelphia appreciated the bell. Residents near the State House complained about its frequent ringing, which, they said, could be fatal to the sick, and in 1772 they sent a petition to the Assembly. No remedy was forthcoming, but the Assembly did take action on another problem. It voted to rebuild the steeple after fears had been expressed that the vibration from the ringing might cause it to collapse.

Meanwhile the State House bell was tolling the deepening crisis with Great Britain. The bell which had run in honor of King George III now rang in protest against his government. It summoned the Assembly to petition for repeal of unwanted taxes. It tolled the closing of the port of Boston and proclaimed the rising opposition to Britain's policy in America. It rang when word was received of the battles at Lexington and Concord, which opened the Revolutionary War. It called the Continental Congress to give George Washington command of the Continental Army. All these were events which sharpened the conflict with Great Britain and led to the Declaration of Independence. The bell, in an even deeper sense, was now to fulfill the instruction, "PROCLAIM LIBERTY THROUGHOUT ALL THE LAND ..."

Independence was resolved by the delegates to the Second Continental Congress on July 2, 1776, and the Declaration formally adopted by the Congress on July 4. Additional time was needed to publish copies and distribute them to the colonies and to arrange a public celebration. Therefore, Monday, July 8, was designated as the day the Declaration was to be read in the State House courtyard.

The day of celebration dawned bright and clear. The public was summoned to the ceremony by the ringing of the bell. By noon a crowd of several thousand had gathered outside the State House. The members of the committees of safety went in a large body to the courtyard, where the Declaration was read by John Nixon, a prominent member of the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety. After the reading, the State House bell and all the bells of the city pealed and the crowd gave a cheer. The militia paraded and fired a salute. That evening the King's coat of arms was brought from the hall in the State House, where the King's courts were formerly held, and burned, to the cheers of the crowd. The following year, 1777, independence day was observed on July 4, the date the Declaration was adopted, and the State House bell pealed out in celebration.

Independence had its price, however, and as



Independence National Historical Park Collection.

*Philadelphia's bells, escorted by cavalry, were convoyed to Allentown to escape British capture.*

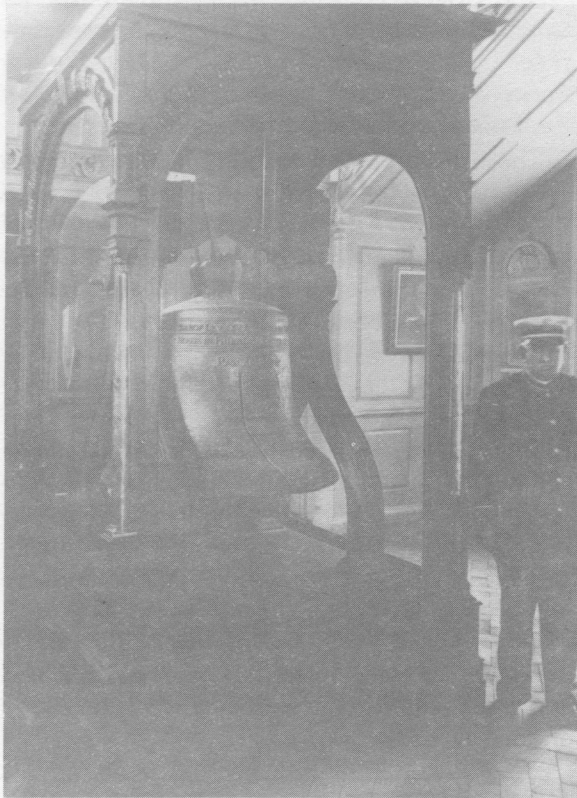
the summer of 1777 progressed, the citizens of Philadelphia prepared as the British army, under General William Howe, marched toward the city. One fear that troubled the authorities was that the occupation force would seize the bells and melt them into balls for their muskets. Some people suggested that the bells be dumped into the Delaware River, and others proposed that they be sent to Lancaster. On September 18, 1777, the bells were placed in a caravan of seven hundred wagons guarded by two hundred North Carolina and Virginia cavalymen, and taken to Allentown, where they were kept in the basement of the Zion Reformed Church. After the British had evacuated Philadelphia in June, 1778, the bells were returned to the city. Once again, on July 4, and on every July 4 thereafter until it finally cracked, the State House bell was rung.

The State House bell was to ring important events for another sixty years. It was rung October 24, 1781, to announce the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown and the defeat of the British in America. On April 16, 1783, it proclaimed the treaty of peace, which recognized American independence. It celebrated the admission of new states and tolled as, one by one, the signers of



the Declaration of Independence died. One such memorable occasion was July 24, 1826, when the bell tolled the passing, on July 4, of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, each a signer and former President. When news arrived an immense crowd gathered in the courtyard. On the spot where the Declaration had been publicly read, a platform was erected and covered with black cloth. Over this a canopy was draped in black on which was laid the nation's flag. The bell was muffled and tolled. The bell which had hailed the Declaration, which Jefferson had penned and Adams had signed, and which had celebrated their oath taking as President, now tolled their departure from this life.

The traditional date for the cracking of the bell is July 8, 1835 — the occasion, the death of John Marshall, Chief Justice of the United States. The



*To discourage vandals, the Liberty Bell was displayed inside a glass and mahogany case.*

bell was not rung again until February 23, 1846, when it joined the celebration of Washington's birthday. The sides of the crack had been drilled apart in the hope that the sound would be improved. The experiment failed — indeed, the ringing worsened the crack. We see the result today, a zigzag cleft nearly three-fourths of an inch wide running from the rim up into the inscription. At the top and bottom of the breach, large bolts now hold its sides in place.

Alexander Outerbridge, a Franklin Institute metallurgist, has suggested three reasons for the cracking of the bell. It could have been caused by the brittleness of the original bell, he says, by Pass and Stow's addition of copper to strengthen the metal and their use of tin to restore its tone, and by the remelting, which made it weaker, less resilient, and more brittle.

Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell belong today to the city of Philadelphia, which purchased the property for \$70,000 from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 1816. In 1828 the bell narrowly escaped being scrapped by its new owners. The city had been renovating Independence Hall and hired John Wilbank to cast a bell to use with the new steeple clock. As partial payment, Wilbank was to get the State House bell, which was estimated to have a junk value of four hundred dollars. Then Wilbank discovered that his costs would be higher than expected. He left the bell hanging in the steeple and the city of Philadelphia sued him for breach of contract. Wilbank agreed to pay court costs and Philadelphia accepted his "gift" of the bell.

The State House bell, known at first as the Bell of the Revolution or Old Independence, came to be called the Liberty Bell in the 1840's when the American Anti-Slavery Society employed it as a symbol of freedom. This abolition group published in 1839 a book entitled *The Liberty Bell*, by "Friends of Liberty," which was distributed at the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Fair. The bell's picture, without the crack, appears in the front of the book with a sonnet suggested by the bell's inscription. Rays of light issue from the bell in all directions.

Legend and sentiment grew and spread. The

most popular story of the Liberty Bell was that of the old bell ringer waiting in the tower to ring out the news of independence on July 4, 1776. To save himself running up the stairs, he asked a small boy to listen to the proceedings of Congress in the Assembly room, and when he heard the expected news, to run to the tower and shout it to him. This story was put into popular verse, well known to children in school. The story was widely accepted as true in 1854, and helped stir popular sentiment toward the bell. Another story that was widely accepted asserted that the bell had cracked on July 4, 1776, at a public reading of the Declaration.



*On view at the San Francisco Exposition.*

The public was finally given the opportunity to see the bell. In 1852 it was brought down from the tower of Independence Hall and placed on exhibit. In the years that have ensued, it has been mounted in the Hall in several ways. At one time it was hung by a chain of thirteen symbolic links. During another period it was dis-

played in a glass and mahogany case to protect it from souvenir hunters and vandals, who had clipped forty pounds of metal from its lip.

Due to the growing popularity of the Liberty Bell, requests to exhibit it began to arrive. The bell was sent on its first long journey in 1885 to be exhibited at the Cotton States Industrial Exposition in New Orleans as a symbol of reconciliation between North and South, twenty years after the Civil War. It was also exhibited in Chicago, Atlanta, Boston, St. Louis, San Francisco, and Charleston, South Carolina. In 1893 the bell was returned to Allentown, where it had once been taken to safety.

Requests for the bell continued, but a group of Philadelphians who were concerned that it might be damaged, including some descendants of signers, used their influence to end its travels. In 1907 a new crack, an extension of the old, had been discovered. It extended up and around the crown for nearly one-fourth the bell's circumference. The cause was the strain on the bell occasioned by the original fracture; this was eased by the design and installation of an interior brace.

The bell continued to be used, however, in support of patriotic causes. During the First World War it was paraded through the streets of Philadelphia. Likewise, on the day of the World War II invasion of Normandy, during radio broadcasts to America and to American troops overseas, the bell was tapped with a rubber mallet, one stroke for each letter in the words "independence" and "liberty."

There have been proposals for repairing the bell so that it might ring once again. In 1959, the Mears and Stainback Foundry, successor to the Whitechapel Foundry in London, offered to repair the Liberty Bell without charge as a gesture of gratitude for America's part in World War II. Melford O. Anderson, the Superintendent of Independence Hall, replied, however, that bell and crack would remain as they were, a symbol of freedom to Americans.